

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program  
Foreign Service Spouse Series

MAGDA H. COOPER

Interviewed by: Monique Wong

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Q: This is Monique Wong on December 17, 1992. I am interviewing Mrs. Magda Cooper for the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History in Washington, D.C. This is Tape I, Side A.

Magda, thank you very much for letting me interview you for the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History. I'm mostly interested in two big things. One is your involvement in the Foreign-Born Spouse Group and the other is your involvement as the Co-Chair for the Foreign Group of the AAFSW. Let's start with the foreign-born spouses. You are of course a Foreign Service spouse with many years of experience and also happen to be a foreign-born spouse from Peru. I thought we could talk about that a little bit. Now, perhaps you can tell me first of all, how long have you been involved with the Foreign-Born Spouse Group?

COOPER: Monique, when I came back from overseas in 1986, I noticed in the American Association for Foreign Service Women Newsletter that there was going to be a workshop on foreign-born spouses at the Overseas Briefing Center (OBC). I was very interested on the issues discussed there, so I attended. It was a very successful meeting. And then I realized that there was a group of foreign-born spouses and I joined.

Q: Tell me a little bit more about that workshop you attended at OBC.

COOPER: Yes. It was nice because they asked us very candid questions like, "Just stand up and tell us what bothers you?" Well the first question of course is the fact that sometimes they consider us different. And one lady stood up and she said, "One day a friend of mine came - an American - and she says, 'Tell me. Do you feel more comfortable with an American friend or with a foreign-born friend?'" And her answer is, "A friend is a friend. It's a person. Do they have to wear a name tag?" And I thought her answer was very good. Unfortunately this discussion was not open to more American-born spouses except the panelists and the organizers of the workshops.

Q: How many people do you remember attended that workshop?

COOPER: At least forty women.

Q: And it was organized by OBC?

COOPER: Right.

Q: Who were the panelists?

COOPER: I don't remember their names.

Q: Tell me some of the things that you discussed.

COOPER: They were discussing, for example, goals. High goals and low goals for the women in the Foreign Service. And that really picked up my attention right away. The title "High Goals and Low Goals." Of course the high goals were directed toward the American-born and the low goals to us.

Q: How so?

COOPER: Because apparently they were talking about career-orientation. That more and more American women want to stay home and pursue a career. They are becoming very frustrated by the fact that they cannot pursue their own career by leaving the country every two years. And we more or less conform to the situations.

Q: The foreign-born spouses.

COOPER: The foreign-born spouses. I told her that it might be so, but I wanted to change the term because it in itself is condescending. And I said, "Why don't we call it 'long-term' and 'short-term?'" And she immediately agreed. I said, "I have not sat idle in this time." By then I probably had eighteen years in the Foreign Service.

Q: So when did you start with the Foreign Service?



COOPER: In 1963. I said, "I had short-term jobs like I worked teaching Spanish in Finland. When I came back to the States I either worked as an interpreter or teaching Spanish at the FSI. Again when I went overseas, I did voluntary work. And when I came back to Washington the last time I had a job in the Director General's office. I was the Manager for Foreign Service Day for four years. So it's not that we foreign-born spouses sit idle. We do a lot of things. We are very realistic. We know that our life is such that every two years you have to change your life patterns.

Q: And we do that in order to stay with the family, stay with your husband.

COOPER: That's right. Our families are a very high priority in our life. I would never consider not having an orderly home for the children. For me would be uncomfortable. So once I get them settled, then I go and look for a job.

Q: What would you say was the outcome of that particular workshop that you attended in 1986?

COOPER: I think there was an awareness of the differences of foreign-born spouses and American-born spouses because we were able to speak out, to express our feelings. I must say most of the girls were real achievers. So there were no shady complaints. But we just wanted to make them realize that because our cultural backgrounds are different, we look at life differently. But it doesn't have better or worse. Just different.

Q: Right, right. So it was a workshop to help the American side of the Foreign Service community to be more in tune with who the foreign-born spouses are and so on?

COOPER: That's right.

Q: And did anything else follow the workshop? Were there later meetings or anything that came out of that workshop?

COOPER: No, unfortunately. We continue with our monthly meetings. Within the group, we had very nice luncheons. I remember we had a luncheon as a farewell party. We had one with a speaker. I don't remember who he was. He was a general as I remember. He spoke about Armed Forces and other issues, but not really anything especially concerning our personal activities or our life.



Q: And that was the same time when you realized that such a group as the Foreign-Born Spouse Group exists in the AAFSW?

COOPER: That's right.

Q: And that's when you joined then?

COOPER: That's when I joined, in 1986.

Q: And that apparently came out from [AAFSW] Forum, didn't it?

COOPER: I was not familiar with Forum yet. I had just come back from overseas. I know now that Forum in those days not only organized the foreign-born spouses, but as of today, Forum is in charge of a wife, American and foreign spouses with young children who have the problem of child care. We have the Forum general meetings. We invite people from the State Department personnel, such as one speaker to tell us about what are the main issues concerning the life of the Foreign Service officers which are all our husbands.

Then we also have a link with the retired wives of Foreign Service officers. Either retired or widows that have another problem, which is do they have enough pension to survive? Are they dealing in investments and buying enough stocks wisely so they can keep their income flowing and inflation doesn't beat their income. They are also part of our group.

Q: So Forum is a much larger group in terms of taking care of the concerns of Foreign Service families.

COOPER: That's right.

Q: Let's get back to the Foreign-Born Spouse Group that you joined in 1986. Describe to me for a moment here Magda what was it like? Who was in charge? How many people were there? Who were they?

COOPER: It was a very cozy group. We had a fantastic president then, Ellie Friedman who is now the wife of our Ambassador to Mozambique. She did a wonderful job. We had at least thirty to forty members.

Q: Where is Ellie Friedman from?

COOPER: Ellie is from Brazil.

Q: And where were the members from, the thirty, forty people?

COOPER: Oh, different places. A girl from Finland replaced Ellie when Ellie left.

Q: What was her name?

COOPER: I don't remember her last name...Larson. She was also a wonderful member. We had girls from all over the world. We had people from Chile, from Argentina, the whole spectrum.

Q: Were there any men?

COOPER: No. We didn't have men members.

Q: What would you say the age group was?

COOPER: We had some retired spouses that were foreign-born. So it varied from twenty-five to sixty, sixty-five.

Q: What kind of things did you do as a group in - that would be in 1986?

COOPER: We did a lot of cultural things like museums. There is a yearly house exhibit, interior decoration. We went to one of those, the Washington interior decoration housing, whose funds go to the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington. We had luncheons. We had Christmas parties. But it was very much social, very social.

Q: Was there any need to deal with any kind of topics at that time? Concerns, issues, or anything at that time?



COOPER: I'm not aware of what happened afterwards. I left in '88 to go to Grenada, and the other day I found an old newsletter and apparently another member that is still a very active member, Elisa Freeman, had a luncheon, and she had Mrs. Nancy Asencio as the speaker. Nancy Asencio is the wife of Ambassador Asencio and she is originally from Cuba. But I was not present at that luncheon because I was overseas. Q: Let's look at the overseas picture for a moment here Magda. You served in Scotland, Costa Rica, Colombia, and so on. Tell me, at those various posts, how many foreign-born spouses did you meet? Just roughly.

COOPER: Well, it varies. In Latin America, for example, the number of foreign-born spouses was very high. We had at least fifty percent Latin Americans when we were in Bogota, Colombia. Q: Were they all Latin American spouses, or not?

COOPER: The majority of them were Latin American, yes. They had an advantage, geographically speaking. They really fall into place in the society, because they don't have language barriers. All the doors are open. That's why I have always said to foreign-born wives never to underestimate your potentiality. You have a fantastic opportunity to show what you can do in the community, to do community work or to be a catalyst between the American-born spouses, the American Embassy per se, find contacts for your own husband.

Q: What about in, say, Finland? How many foreign-born spouses were there? You were there two times.

COOPER: The first time, only two.

Q: Two, and that was in '76, '79.

COOPER: Right. The second time there were at least five or six Finnish-born spouses.

Q: And that was '81 to...

COOPER: No, '84.

Q: '84 to '86?

COOPER: Right. To tell you the truth, some of the spouses told me, in confidence, in a very confidential way, that they were not really pleased to be back, because a lot of people, had very high expectations from them.



Q: You're talking about the Finnish...

COOPER: The Finnish spouses. The Finnish people had a lot of expectations. They expected them to entertain a lot more, to be more active. And the Americans too, because they said, "Well, you know, you are in your own country. You shouldn't complain." This particular person had small children. She didn't have the freedom to do all the things that she would have loved to do, but still she felt the pressure. Because she was foreign-born, she had all the skills to do a better job.

Q: She was Finnish though, right?

COOPER: She was Finnish. And another thing that bothers sometimes - foreign-born wives - when they return to their country, is that an awful lot of people think that because they are their friend, they can easily, through them, go to the American Embassy and get a visa. That is not true.

Q: So you get pressure from relatives, friends when you serve in your own country?

COOPER: You get pressure, right, when you serve in your own country. Now, I know of another situation. A very good friend of mine returned to Peru. Her husband was a DCM. She made a very wise move. First of all, she told all her relatives that family day was once a week. When she would either go to see them or they would come and see her. That her house was the DCM's residence, not her own place. People, relatives, friends could not just pop in every day, every time they felt like it, because her husband had official obligations. He might have to bring people in for drinks or organize meetings, and she had to have her house in shape. Not just full of people roaming around. She really had . . . .

Q: She set up some guidelines.

COOPER: Guidelines with her own family. She had a fantastic time. First of all she was an extremely efficient Foreign Service spouse. She would shine whether it was in Peru or Washington or in Guatemala where they ended up. But still, it's not easy. You have to be strong and tell them how you feel, what are your duties.

Q: What about serving - you just mentioned perfectly about some of the difficulties when you go serve back in your own country - how about serving in the US, back to Washington, DC for example or serving in a third country? What are some of the difficulties?



COOPER: The first time I had an opportunity to have a country where it was not my own culture, other than Scotland - but I don't count Scotland because they're English speaking and that already was an extension of what the United States would be like - but from Finland. I knew that it was going to be very difficult and very different. But I told you, I am a planner. I don't think you run into difficulties if you plan in advance. What I did was, I was in Medellin, Colombia. My husband received his orders. Finland. We had never been out of the Latin American area.

Q: Is that right?

COOPER: Right. Except for Scotland. So I said, "I will go, but not without language." Because I have never depended on my husband a hundred percent with language. Asking him, "Could you please make this phone call for me?" I have to be able to have the language in order to function. So, immediately he applied for language training for me for Finnish. I was accepted with a condition that I could not miss classes, because that disrupts the rest of the class. That I take my course seriously, because it's very expensive.

I solved my problem by bringing a nanny with me. I asked for permission from Immigration for ten months, the length of time we were involved. In those days immigration laws were much more lax than they are now. So my three children, the youngest being only three, didn't suffer my being totally involved in this job.

Q: Language training?

COOPER: Language training. It paid off. It was a wonderful experience, because when I got to Finland, it not only helped me to get my family very well organized. First of all I was able to find a beautiful house, to rent a wonderful place. I was able to look into schools. One piece of advice that I always give to any person going overseas is not to rely only on the post report. "Go out. Do a little research of your own. There are lots of opportunities out there. Take advantage of them and let your children take advantage of them."

So I didn't like the school situation, although, in the post report they were telling us there were two fantastic English-speaking schools. It was a difficult situation. The schools. One of them, just to give you an example, grouped four different age groups in one class. So my twelve-year-old was going to be very bored, studying with an eight-year-old. I inquired around and I ended up talking to the board of education in my neighborhood and I said, "Do you think I can bring my children to the Swedish school system?" They said, "Yes, as long as you get a tutor and help the children out with language." It was the best move I ever made in my life.



Q: I guess I'm hearing, say for an American spouse, you have serving in the States where it's home, basically, and then serving overseas where it's foreign; but for the foreign-born spouse, serving in your home country is home and then serving overseas is foreign and then serving in America is also foreign in a sense.

COOPER: That's right.

Q: So what are some of the difficulties that a foreign-born spouse may encounter back in the United States?

COOPER: I tell you, sometimes coming back to Washington can be the most difficult posting that you get. Adapting. Especially. . . The first time I came back to Washington was in 1966. There were not any of the support systems, networking, that we have today. It was a very difficult adjustment to be made. This is something that I tell all the wives, especially the foreign-born, the fact that we are getting together now is to express our feelings, to express our mind. It's okay to say "I'm going through difficult times." That's not being nagging.

For example, going to a doctor here is difficult. Most of us in our home towns, we have a doctor within our family. I had my own father. There is always somebody. And you just stay home, and the doctor will come and see you. Here you can be running a very high temperature. The doctor says, "Okay, you want to see me? Come to my office." That was a big adjustment to make.

The State Department by then was not well organized. They didn't have the office, for example, that we have now, of the Family Liaison Office or the Employee Consultation Service. Where if you have a tragedy in your life, or a problem, you say, "Listen, I need help. I'm going through a very hard period of time." I lost a child. [pauses] But, the main thing is, you don't speak about it because you think, "Well, who is going to listen to me? Who wants to listen to me?"Q: I'm so sorry.

COOPER: Anyway, this was almost twenty-two years ago, no more than that, twenty-seven years ago. A tragedy's a tragedy, but if you have your family, if you have your immediate family with you, it's not so much. It's a support system that you need. But now you have the State Department, you have support systems within the State Department. You have workshops. You have networking. If a women gets breast cancer, there is a group. They meet together. They talk about it, and they discuss issues. In those days there was nothing.

Q: And then it's especially difficult for the foreign-born spouses who don't have families here.



COOPER: Of course. You don't have families. You don't have the support. You don't have anything. Anyway, many spouses can go through the whole, the same experience. It's inhuman not to talk about these things, because they happen. They are real. So you know you call, you say, "I'm going through a very hard time." Call Jill Chobanian (Employees' Consultation Service Officer, Department of State) and tell her how you feel. If you lost your husband, also tell them.

Q: I was thinking also, Magda, in terms of the foreign-born spouses, the employee, the husband or the wife - most of the time husbands as we know - are coming back to the States and that's their home country. Does that create a problem? Do you know what I'm talking about?

COOPER: Yes, it is a problem, because you realize how culturally different we are from each other. This is something the husband never really understands, because you are trying so hard to adapt that you ignore your inner feelings and you don't talk about it. For example, we grieve differently. The Americans in a way, especially the males, they tend to say "life goes on." In our society we feel guilty if we cut that part of your life which is sorrow. You have to express yourself. You have to feel sorrowful, because that links you with the void, with the person that you're missing.

Q: Yes.

COOPER: And the only way to give that person respect, to show that she was part of you or he was part of you, is by giving time to the grieving process.

Q: To heal.

COOPER: To heal. And in the American mind, or in the American culture, that is not so. So of course there are many differences. There are many differences.

Q: Well, let's talk for a moment how you see that. What are some of the conflicting values, perhaps, that you feel between your culture and the American culture that have created tensions or problems? That you have to adjust to.



COOPER: You know, just the general. . . For example, I would say priorities. What is important in your life. You set your own priorities, and you never stop setting your priorities, because that's how your culture formed you. So for me, the family is very important. If I get a job, I get a job, but for me it's not that important. If it's going to interfere with my family's well-being, I will definitely either delay my employment or postpone it.

For example, once I came back to Washington and I went right back to work and the children would come home and I wasn't home. The amount of guilt that I felt, and the anxiety in order to come home before they would get [home]. Well, they were home before I came home. It didn't seem to bother, for example, my partner, but it bothered me tremendously. Even if it was a couple of hours that the children were going to be alone, because anything could happen. You know we are very protective in our way of raising children.

Q: Perhaps we can look at raising children for a little while here, Magda. We both attended a meeting.

COOPER: That's right.

Q: ...on raising children in a bi-cultural marriage. Since you have grown children, tell me a little bit about how that was like for you, with two cultures in the family, two languages.

COOPER: Two languages. Three.[laughs]

Q: Three.

COOPER: Three, because they went to Swedish schools. I never sort of enforced either culture. I let it happen. I was very natural about it, because I think if you try too hard, one way or the other, the children rebel. So the children had to look at you as a set of parents, and they acquire values from each one of you. I think my kids have a fantastic sense of, for example, work ethic, which comes from my husband. He is a very hardworking person.

I have also been able to raise my daughter with the same goals that the boys have. I have two boys and one girl. And my girl is definitely an excellent student. Dean's list. Her first priority is to accomplish a career in her life. But I think my kids are very family-oriented in the sense that they - every break, every vacation they want to come home. They respect both of our cultures.

Q: How do you make sure that they learn Spanish as well as English?



COOPER: I always spoke to them in Spanish. We were lucky we served in Latin America for the majority of our assignments, and when possible, like when we went to Finland, I took the nanny with us, and the nanny spoke only Spanish.

Q: Ah, okay. And your husband spoke, speaks?

COOPER: Spanish.

Q: Fluent Spanish?

COOPER: Fluent Spanish. And I took them home to see my parents. They also look for foreign kids. If there's a Spanish-speaking person in a group, they go and talk to them.

Q: Well, good.

COOPER: This is something that we had to learn as foreign spouses. We are not only going to depend on the American wives to organize things for us. We have to give and, not only take, but give. This is something that I have really instilled in my children. "What you are getting, give it to somebody else." Because they have this exposure of foreign countries and foreign people and they know people very well. They don't have prejudices. If they do, well, they know better, not to show them, because you can never tell how your children are feeling. But they are in general very careful human beings, because they don't want to hurt anybody's feelings.

Q: Very sensitive.

COOPER: They're very sensitive to them. I have always told them, "Be careful." I think you teach by example. They get involved. For example, the older boy is teaching Spanish to Central American refugees after working hours two or three hours a week.

Q: In DC?

COOPER: In DC. That was his own initiative. "Well you know I have to make a contribution." He's fluent in Spanish and he feels he's giving these Central Americans - the majority are from El Salvador - something that he has and he never takes, took for granted.



Q: How do they feel? Do they really feel like that's a Spanish and then the American....They're both pretty comfortable cultures to them?

COOPER: Yes, they feel very comfortable in both cultures.

Q: I think so. It sounds like it.

COOPER: Two of them were here for Thanksgiving and there is the Peruvian restaurant called Cuzco, and I took them to the restaurant. Of course they knew the menu. They knew exactly what. . . All their favorite dishes. They all ask me to cook for them special things. When I went to see the one in Colorado, I had to make a Spanish paella for him and his classmates. So they are very fond of what home is like, and it's nice to give them that feeling.

Q: Magda, Let's turn to the citizenship issue for a moment. We both know that becoming an American citizen could be a concern for some foreign-born spouses. What was it like for you? Was there any question that you were going to become a citizen?

COOPER: Well, I got married in 1963. The process was completely different to what it is today. My husband had to submit his resignation.

Q: Oh?

COOPER: We met in Peru. I had been here in the United States before, in college. Then I returned to Peru, and when I went back to Peru I met him. He had to submit his resignation. It took over six months to hear back from the State Department whether they had approved his marrying me or not. That was a tremendous - a true love trial. Then, immediately after, we were transferred overseas to Scotland. They would not allow a foreign-born spouse to go overseas before getting her naturalization papers.

Q: Is that right?

COOPER: So, we had about six weeks of time off, came to the States. In three weeks I got my U.S. citizenship. So I never thought about it. I knew it had to be done. It was a must. We didn't have a choice. Nowadays foreign-born spouses can choose. In my personal experience, it has been to my advantage, because I have been able to get federal jobs here in Washington in the State Department. After all, your children are American, so they want the mother to have the same citizenship. At least my kids feel that way.



I can understand why some spouses, foreign-born spouses, want to keep their passport. First of all, now there are dual nationalities, recognized in many countries. If the marriage doesn't work, and they want to return to their country and they don't have access to. . .

Q: To things.

COOPER: Or the legal rights that they had before, because they gave up their citizenship. Where do they go? It has pros and cons. I just leave it to the individual. They have to make their own decision in that respect.

Q: But, certainly without U.S. citizenship, employment is a little harder for the spouses overseas. Is that correct?

COOPER: Definitely. Overseas and even in Washington.

Q: Magda, tell me what your perspective is on how Americans relate to foreign-born spouses, either at post or just in general. We talked earlier that they may not understand how foreign-born spouses. . . What kind of concerns they have. But in general what is your. . .

COOPER: I find that in many instances, the foreign-born spouse tends to feel threatened.

Q: Overseas?

COOPER: Overseas. I'm here, too, threatened by the power that the American woman has.

Q: Really?

COOPER: And this is something that I always try to stress. "It's not so. You have to open yourself and get to know that person better and you will realize that deep inside they have exactly the problems, the same problems, you have." Only we, especially Latin Americans, we speak more about things. We express ourselves. We call each other. We have a network.



The American women are more reserved. They don't say how they feel. It's almost bad form to tell everybody what is going on with your life. But I think we're getting - especially in our group - we're getting more and more conscious that we have a common ground. That's why I'm so happy to have been able to be on the board of the American Association of Foreign Service Women, because we just tell in the open what is wrong. What happens. If a family or a couple is having problems, we can approach the wife and try to help. So. . . [pause in tape]

Monique, you probably are aware that we are. . . We have now lawyers who have issued the law practices of the three different departments for areas, like we have contacts with the divorce laws of DC, of Maryland and Virginia. Make a very thorough study to see which one has better rates, which one would give the spouse a better deal should she have to divorce her husband if the situation becomes unbearable.

Q: Oh, I didn't know.

COOPER: So, there are so many things that we have been able to accomplish that help any person in distress that I find I'm in a privileged situation by being part of this group.

Q: So I guess the legal system would also help the foreign-born spouses, of course, in case when they get divorced or separated from their husbands.

COOPER: That's right.

Q: Are there any kind of special things that you're aware of regarding foreign-born spouses in divorce and separation?

COOPER: Yes, but you see the advantages that all spouses in general have today is that we have so many more support systems within the State Department. They can go to the Employee Consultation Service. They can go to the Family Liaison Office. They can give advice on. . . Either go through counseling, so they can work out the differences, or, if the situation is such that it is better for them not to be together, they can refer them to the best lawyers we have. Now that we have our computer link we have names of every lawyer that you can imagine in town. [Laughs] And all the information that we're getting within. . .

Q: This is through AAFSW?



COOPER: That's right. All the information that we are getting as far as the babysitting services, old people's homes - in case you have to take your parents should they get in a stage they can not be cared for at home anymore - we are going to place every piece of information that we are gathering in our computer link, so any spouse who needs services, who needs information can just approach us, and they will be served.

Q: Magda, looking at some of these concerns that we have been discussing, how comfortable were you serving overseas with your husband?

COOPER: As a foreign spouse. I feel very comfortable, thanks to some fantastic role models that I have had through the years, both American-born and foreign. Foreign spouses that became ambassadors' wives. They gave me the guidelines to be myself, not to try to impress anybody by being somebody else. Natural. Yet, serve with dignity, because it is a responsibility. It's not a game. It's something that I take very seriously. I think our image overseas is very important. We represent one of the biggest countries in the world, and it's only fair that we do our job well.

Q: Did you ever feel that you were asked certain questions about the United States that you felt uncomfortable with or. . .

COOPER: I try always to keep away from politics. I think there are a lot of people that are insensitive and don't have very good manners and could be sometimes even insulting. People like that in any other situation you just ignore. That's what you learn by being assertive. Don't ever pay too much attention to little people. Little minds. Be yourself. Always think in the large scope what is important, and that is a good safeguard not to fall into a trap.

Q: You also mentioned earlier that you can be, say, a Peruvian overseas and entertain like a Peruvian. Can you. . .

COOPER: Oh, yes. That is possible. Do you remember in our first meeting we had a very, very charming girl from the Philippines?

Q: You're referring to our Foreign-Born Spouse Group meeting?



COOPER: Foreign-Born, from the - yes, from the Philippines. She was in our meeting. She said, "Do you think I can serve Filipino food?" and we said, "Of course! You are the best Filipino cook in town and nobody has the opportunity to try the food that you fix." You never would do it of course on Thanksgiving Day. But you learn when to do things in the appropriate time.

Q: Do you think it's important for a foreign-born spouse to speak very good English and to know American history, American government, American culture very well when they go overseas?

COOPER: Important? Of course it is important. Any extra bit of education that you have adds to you as an asset, to this organization and to your husband. So I never stop learning. I have tried to join all the Overseas Briefing Center workshops that there are whenever I'm in Washington. There's a lot to learn.

At the present time I'm taking courses at American University on the American family. I'm learning a lot of history at the same time. We have to be aware of what is going on in this country to project ourselves as well-educated people. Unfortunately, we spend so much time overseas that we don't have these opportunities often, but when we do, we should take advantage of them.

Q: Some may disagree with you there and say, "Well, you don't actually...You're not the employee. Your husbands or your wives are the employees and therefore you're not really representing the U.S." Would you agree?

COOPER: No, because when we go overseas as a couple, the local people, they view us as the two for the price of one, unfortunately. No matter how many new laws exist, that's what they expect from you. If they send somebody who is just a mediocre person, that reveals the United States doesn't have enough interest in that country so they're just sending somebody. So, the more dignity and the more importance that you give to your job, the better projection you make. They feel, the host country, feels that they deserve better. There is always some gossip going about the previous two or three people before, and the mistakes they made. So you are very conscious of trying to project yourself.

Q: So, even though, what you're saying is that, even though the law may say that spouse is not judged, the reality is that they are judged.

COOPER: Of course they are.

Q: By local people.



COOPER: By local people especially. The way you entertain, the way you conduct yourself, the contribution you make. And they're comparing you with people from other embassies.

Q: Good point.

COOPER: The other embassies probably are doing as much effort as you are, in order to perform well. The diplomatic career, no matter how new issues come about, will always involve the spouse, as long as you go together overseas.

Q: The foreign-born spouses is another dimension of the American culture since we have many, many foreigners in the United States.

COOPER: That's right.

Q: Magda, tell me for a moment here about how your family feels about your marrying an American and serving overseas for America? Have they ever expressed any sort of. . .

COOPER: Animosity?

Q: Not, not. . . That's not what I'm looking for. But how did they feel? What did they say to you?

COOPER: I think they. . . First of all, they took my husband first, not as an American or as a diplomat, as a person. They liked him, and he was accepted. So that was the first step. If they wouldn't have liked him they probably would have said, "No, we don't want you to marry him." Because Latin American parents are still very influential on whatever decision you make, on the children's decisions. They never really interfered in our relationship and we were able to. . .

In that sense it's an advantage. I think we Foreign Service families have an advantage that many families don't have in the sense that we are so far away from our families, immediate families, that there is not interference. If you have problems, you tend to work them out together.



That gives you a fantastic sense of growth, and a sense of self, because you have to do extensive growing up on your own. Mami is not there. You can not just take the phone every other day and tell, "Mami, I'm having a problem." You solve your problems. You try to see what are your weaknesses and how you can improve them. If your husband has some - which in many instances he can be blamed for problems - you just talk about it. Say. Speak your mind. Say, "You know, I give up a lot to be your partner. So I expect a lot too." It's a reciprocal give and take.

Q: But does your family have any sort of idea of what it is like for you to be in the Foreign Service, in the American Foreign Service? Do they say, "Oh, that's so great, so glamorous"?

COOPER: Yes, I think they. . . Everybody thinks it's such a glamorous career, and it is. But it's a lot of work, too. It is a lot of work, adjusting, worrying about the children, the future. Are they going to be okay? Are all these moves going to be a problem in the future? Are the children going to be deprived of educational, the American educational system?

But in general they gain so much from being overseas, because they learn about the world on a first time basis. Nobody has a classroom. They learn from nature. Everything is open for them. My children can ski, can climb mountains, can do so many things. You feel guilty about detaching them from their roots and their friends, but then that's why the family can be such a strong element in their lives.

Q: I sort of want to turn to something different here, Magda. If you will compare the American Foreign Service with the Peruvian diplomatic service for me. Are you aware of how the diplomats are chosen in Peru, and how they choose their assignments and so on and so forth?

COOPER: Peru has a very good professional foreign service, but I'm not familiar with what is going on at the present time, because I have not been in touch with any embassies, per se. I do have a little group of Peruvian friends here in Washington. We meet occasionally. They send me invitations for, for example, Christmas parties. I try to be in touch.

Q: Are they diplomats?

COOPER: No. They're just residents. I haven't been in touch with diplomats for a long time, because the last time, for example, when we were overseas, was in Grenada, and Grenada only had three or four embassies. Peru didn't have representation there. So I don't know what is going on.



Q: I was just curious, that's all.

COOPER: The country's going through changes as you know.

Q: Yes, yes, of course. Magda, so you were involved with the Foreign-Born Spouse Group in '86 and then you went overseas. Later on, did you get involved with the group again?

COOPER: Yes, I came back from overseas in 1991. That's when I was approached to join the board of AAFSW. I was very happy that I did it, because it has been a wonderful experience.

Q: What were you asked to do then?

COOPER: They asked me, "Would you like to be on the board?", and I said, "Yes, and I'm very interested in Forum, because I would like to deal with the issues." They put me as Co-Chair with Maggie Morse who's been a chairman of Forum for several years. She's an experienced member. We are working together very well.

Q: So through Forum you got back. . . .

COOPER: I got back and they said, "Well we're going to get the group going again." And that's when you became the Chairman of the group.

Q: Oh, okay.

COOPER: So, I started to go to the meetings. I'm very, very impressed.

Q: Thank you.

COOPER: Things are going well. The difference in the Foreign-Born Wives' Group now is that we're dealing with issues. We're trying to have more meetings with speakers, like we have had so far, and discuss what makes the foreign-born spouse comfortable, more comfortable. We want to welcome them, to tell them, "You are needed. You are valuable. You are part of us." So when they go overseas there will never be a separation of foreign versus American. They said, "In Washington we were received with open arms."



As you saw the other day, our president, Christine, she went to our Christmas party, and she told the foreign-born spouses, "If you have any problems, please come and talk to me." In an organization as large as the State Department, it is important that people feel welcomed, because you, generally, don't like to be taken for granted. They do the work. They work all the time, and to come to Washington and be ignored. I feel like - everybody feels once in awhile - like having a little pat on their back.

This is essential for us to continue as a group and also to be part of this big organization, the Foreign Service, that demands a lot from the families. Fortunately, they are doing a lot more in recent years to make our lives more comfortable. Still, we have tremendous hurdles to pass in order to be effective and to be happy at the same time.

Q: So you feel that our approach now with addressing issues directly is a good way to continue?

COOPER: I think it's very effective, because my feeling is that we have to make - especially the very new foreign-born spouses, the ones that are just getting on board - aware of what is available for them. So they don't miss anything. Take advantage of language training. Get ready. Plan.

Q: Especially those who just come into the United States for the first time.

COOPER: That's right.

Q: After they got married overseas?

COOPER: That's right. Try to get a job when you are overseas with the government so when you come back you have the executive order and you are able to be reintegrated in your job in Washington. If you don't tell the spouses what is available, there is no way they're going to find out, and this is a fantastic way to keep everybody informed.

Q: Let's talk on the Forum a little bit. I'd like to hear what's going on with the Forum and what exactly is its purpose, how often you meet, and so on.



COOPER: Well, the last meeting we had was on November 21. We had three speakers, Jill Chobanian, who is the Employees' Consultation Service Officer. From the Family Liaison Office we had Jo-Anne Vaughn. Both of them addressed the issues of adjusting to the Foreign Service when both couples are working. The burden on the family and the transition in Washington, where to send the children, whether it would be better to be overseas so the children can profit from the boarding school system.

Then we had also the AFSA Vice President, Mr. Joseph Melrose. He talked to us about the selection out process, which, unfortunately, is going to affect a lot of our future, middle career officers.

Q: Oh, how so?

COOPER: Well, this is very involved. It would take us another session to explain, but the bottom line is this: that we have to know. We have to be prepared for it. Should our husbands have to leave the Service in their, let's say, early forties, they should be, both as a couple, should be contemplating a second career. Also, providing funds, savings, for you and your children. What happens if the husband is selected out when you are paying college education? Or you're having parents who need care, and that could perfectly well happen when you are in your forties. So, we are warning the families, "This can happen to you. Let's be ready."

In order to emphasize the savings part of the Forum, we had Lynn Alexis Corey, Lee Corey, who is a financial planner. She talked to us about the different savings devices that there are, and how you can put money aside for your children's education, for your own pension. Especially women, for us, we don't have full-time jobs. We have not been able to accumulate enough social security for our own pensions. She gave us tremendous information regarding how to save for the future.

Q: How often does the Forum meet?

COOPER: We have monthly meetings. When we bring all the group together, we bring the young mothers with the child care problem. We update on what is going on. The amount of children that are now being placed in different houses. So far we have tried to have private houses. This has also given a business, a new career, to some of the spouses. They're running a small, little nursing place, day care center. This will go also on the computer link, information about the wives, spouses that are opening day care centers in their house.

Then we bring the representative of the senior, retired spouses. And she lets us know what is going on, how they are coping with different situations, and what can be done.



Then we have the program. We have been very lucky to have Joan Dixon, who still is involved in Forum. She's been a wonderful help to organize our programs. She has very good ideas. She's a very experienced Foreign Service spouse. We sit together with Maggie and Jean and the other spouses that are in the subgroups, and we discuss what are the themes that would most interest our wives.

Q: What are the subgroups, Magda?

COOPER: Well, the subgroups, the side groups I could say.....

Q: Such as?

COOPER: Like the mothers who are running the day care centers. They are not Co-Chairs, but they are like part of our group, and the representative of the senior spouses. They all come to the meetings, and they inform us about their concerns. We try to deal with the problems.

Q: When is the next Forum going to be?

COOPER: We'll probably have our next meeting in January, after the holidays.

Q: What kind of things are being planned?

COOPER: We'll discuss them in January. We are planning to have a very interesting year with the new administration and new elements in our Foreign Service. We are all unaware of what is going to happen after January 20. So that will be a starting point. We'll discuss our program then.

Q: Magda, in today's Washington Post, on the Federal Page, there is a long article on the Rockefeller Amendment. What's your feeling on that?

COOPER: Well, I think it's not a happy situation. My feeling is that this new law is going to affect negatively our Foreign Service dependents in a way that they will not have the jobs that are already scarce available only for Foreign Service dependents. Now they have to share it with somebody else. So, it is. . . . .

Q: Share it with the overseas Americans you mean?



COOPER: Residents, right. It is going to be problematic. I find it difficult. They're talking about drivers and cooks.

Q: Various positions.

COOPER: Various positions.

Q: Many different positions. They also mention, I think, accountants, lawyers, something like that.

COOPER: Well, there are two sides to this problem. It's also going to create tremendous resentment among the local communities that get jobs within an embassy, and they need those jobs. So you're replacing Americans, so-called wealthy Americans, and displacing the local employees. It's not a very good image policy.

Who are these Americans overseas? We don't know. They might be spouses of, let's say Exxon Corporation, or an automobile industry overseas. Now, if their spouses need jobs, don't you feel that they could perfectly be entitled to get their jobs from their companies, from American firms overseas?

Q: I don't know. I haven't been overseas.

COOPER: I don't know where to draw the line. I don't know who these Americans are. So, if the law applies to every American overseas, I think it's unfair to include the spouses of employees from big firms, big corporations, because they could be able to provide jobs for their dependents as well and not rely on the U.S. government.

Q: Well, we have covered a lot here, Magda. Do you have anything you would like to add?

COOPER: No, Monique. Thank you very much.

Q: Well, thank you.

COOPER: I appreciate your interview today and enjoyed it very much. Thanks.



Q: Thank you. I think this is going to be interesting. Thanks again.

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## BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: James Ford Cooper

Spouse's Position: ARA/Special Coordinator for Democracy & Development in Central America

Spouse Entered Service:1960Left Service: You Entered Service:1963Left Service:

Status: Spouse of FSO

Place/Date of birth: Santiago, Chile - November 20, 1937

Maiden Name: Magda Huaco

Parents (Name, Profession):

Dr. Segundo Huaco Vizcardo, M.D.

Olivia Velez de Huaco

Schools (Prep, University):

French speaking secondary school in Uma, Peru

Chatham College Pittsburgh, Pa.

American University, Washington, DC.

Profession: Spanish teacher, conference planner

Date/Place of Marriage: Lima, Peru - July 6, 1963

Children:

Lane Cooper 27



Carl Cooper 22

Vanessa Cooper 20

End of interview